The Pride of the Camp

Charles G. D. Roberts.

IT WAS heavy sledding on the Upper Ottanoosis trail.

The two lumbermen were nearing the close of the third day of the hard four days' haul, in from the settlements to the camp. At the head of the first team, his broad jaw set and his small gray eyes angry with fatigue, trudged the big figure of Red McWha. With his fiery red head and his large red face, he was the only one of his coloring in a large family so dark that they were known as the "Black McWhas," and his temper seemed to have been chronically soured by the singularity of his type. He was a good woodsman, however, and a good teamster, and his horses followed confidently at his heels like dogs. The second team was led by a tall, gaunt-jawed, one-eyed lumberman named Jim Johnson, invariably known as "Walley." From the fact that his blind eye was of a peculiar blankness, like whitish porcelain, he had been nick-named "Wall-Eye;" but owing to his general popularity, combined with the emphatic views he held on that particular subject, the name had been mitigated to Walley.

The two were hauling in supplies for Conroy's Camp, on Little Ottanoosis Lake. Silently, but for the clank and creak of the harness, and the soft thut, thut of the trodden snow, the little procession toiled on through the soundless desolation. Presently the teams rounded a turn of the trail, and began to descend the steep slope which led down to Joe Godding's solitary cabin on the edge of Burnt Brook Meadows.

But there was no light in the window. No homely pungency of wood-smoke breathed welcome on the bitter air. The cabin looked startlingly deserted.

"Whoa!" commanded McWha sharply, and glanced around at Johnson with an angry misgiving in his eyes. The teams came to a stop with a shiver of all their bells.

Then, upon the sudden stillness, arose the faint sound of a child's voice, hopelessly.

"Somethin' wrong down yonder!" growled McWha.

As he spoke, Walley Johnson sprang past him, and went loping down the hill.

Red McWha followed very deliberately with the teams. He resented anything emotional. And he was prepared to feel himself aggrieved.

When he reached the cabin door the sound of weeping had stopped. Inside he found Walley Johnson on his knees before the stove, hurriedly lighting a fire. Wrapped in his coat, and clutching his arm as if afraid he might leave her, stood a tiny, flaxen-haired child, perhaps five years old. The cabin was cold, almost as cold as the snapping night outside. Along the middle of the floor, with bedclothes from the bunk heaped awkwardly upon it in the little one's efforts to warm it back to responsive life, sprawled rigidly the lank body of Joe Godding.

Red McWha stared for a moment in silence, then stooped, examined the dead man's face, and felt his breast.

"Deader'n a herring!" he muttered.

Johnson made no reply till the flame caught the kindling and rushed in from the open draught with a cordial roar. Then he stood up.

"He's been dead these hours and hours!" he said. "An' the fire out! an' the kid most froze! A sick man like he was, to've kept the kid alone here with him that-a-way!" And he glanced down at the dead figure with severe reprobation.

"Never was much good, that Joe Godding!" muttered McWha, always critical.

As the two woodsmen discussed the situation, the child, a delicate-featured, blue-eyed girl, was gazing up from under her mop of bright hair, first at one, then at the other. Walley Johnson was the one who had come in answer to her long wailing, who had hugged her close, and wrapped her up, and crooned over her in his pity, and driven away the terrors. But she did not like to look at him, though his gaunt, sallow face was strong and kind.

People are apt to talk easy generalities about the intuition of children! As a matter of fact, the little ones are not above judging quite as superficially and falsely as their elders. The child looked at her protector's sightless eye, then turned away and sidled over to McWha with one hand coaxingly outstretched. McWha's mouth twisted sourly. Without appearing to see the tiny hand he deftly evaded it. Stooping over the dead man, he picked him up, straightened him out decently on his bunk, and covered him away from sight with the blankets.

"Ye needn't be so crusty to the kid, when she wants to make up to ye!" protested Walley, as the little one turned back to him with a puzzled look in her tearful blue eyes.

"It's all alike they be, six, or sixteen, er sixty-six!" remarked McWha sarcastically, stepping to the door. "I dont want none of 'em! Ye kin look out for 'er! I'm for the horses."

"Don't talk out so loud!" admonished the little one. "You'll wake daddy. Poor daddy's sick!"

"Poor lamb!" murmured Johnson folding her to his great breast with a pang of pity. "No, we won't wake daddy. Now, tell me, what's yer name?"

"Daddy called me Rosy-Lilly!" answered the child playing with a button on Johnson's vest. "Is he gettin' warmer now? He was so cold, an' he wouldn't speak to Rosy-Lilly!"

"Rosy-Lilly it be!" agreed Johnson. "Now, we jest won't bother daddy, him bein' so sick! You an' me'll git supper."

The cabin was warm now, and on tiptoe Johnson and Rosy-Lilly went about their work, setting the table, "bilin'" the tea, and frying the bacon. When Red McWha came in from the barn, and stamped the snow from his feet, Rosy-Lilly said "Hush!" laid her finger on her lips and glanced meaningly at the moveless shape in the bunk.

"We mus' let 'im sleep, Rosy-Lilly says!" decreed Johnson with an emphasis which penetrated McWha's unsympathetic consciousness, and elicited a non-committal grunt.

For nearly an hour the two men smoked in silence, their steaming feet under the stove, their backs turned toward the long unstirring shape in the big bunk. At last Johnson stood up and shook himself.

"Well!" he drawled, "I s'pose we mus' be doin' the best we kin fer poor old Joe. We can't leave him here in the house!"

"No, we can't," answered McWha. "He'd ha'nt it, an' us too, ever after, like as not!' We got to give 'im lumberman's shift, till the boss kin send an' take 'im back to the settlement for the parson to do 'im up right an' proper."

So they buried poor Joe Godding deep in the snow under the big elm behind the cabin; and piled a monument of cordwood above him, so that the foxes and wild cats could not disturb his lonely sleep; and surmounted the pile with a rude cross to signify its character. Then, with lighter hearts, they went back to the cabin fire, which seemed to burn more freely now that the grim presence of its former master had been removed.

"Now, what's to be done with the kid—with Rosy-Lilly? They do say in the settlements as how Joe Godding hain't kith nor kin in the world, savin' an' exceptin' only the kid," began Johnson.

McWha nodded indifferently.

"Well," went on Johnson, "we can't do nawthin' but take her on to the camp, now! Mebbe the boss'll let the hands keep her, to kinder chipper up the camp when things gits dull. I reckon when the boys sees her sweet face they'll all be wantin' to be guardeens to her!"

McWha spat accurately into the crack of the grate. "I ain't got no fancy for young 'uns in camp, but ye kin do ez ye like, Walley Johnson," he answered grudgingly. "Only I want it understood, right now, I ain't no guardeen, an' won't be to nawthin' that walks in petticoats!"

"We'll tell the kid," Johnson went on, "as how her daddy had to be took away in the night because he was so sick, an' couldn't speak to nobody, an' we was goin' to take keer o' her till he gits back!—an' that's the truth!" he added with a sudden passion of tenderness and pity in his tone.

At this hint of emotion McWha laughed sarcastically. Then knocking out his pipe he proceeded to fill the stove for the night, and spread his blanket on the floor beside it. "If ye want to make the camp a baby farm," he growled, "don't mind me!"

"We'll every mother's son o' us be guardeen to her!" he declared. Every man in camp assented noisily, saving only Red McWha. He, as was expected of him, sat back and grinned.

From the first, Rosy-Lilly made herself at home in the camp. For a few days she fretted after her father, but Jimmy Brackett was ever on hand to divert her mind with astounding fairy-tales, during the hours when the rest of the hands were away chopping and hauling. Happily, a baby's sorrow is shorter than its remembrance, and Rosy-Lilly soon learned to repeat her phrase—"Poor Daddy had to go 'way off,'" without the quivering lips and wistful look which made the big woodsmen's hearts tighten so painfully beneath their homespun shirts.

Rosy-Lilly had not been in the camp a week before McWha's "ugliness" to her had aroused even the boss's resentment, and the boss was a just man. Of course, it was generally recognized that McWha was not bound, by any known law or obligation, to take any notice of the child, still less to "make a fuss over her" with the rest of the camp. There was absolutely nothing to be done about it, for Red McWha was utterly within his rights.

The evening meal, "supper," in Conroy's Camp was the time of relaxation, with only pipe and bunk to come after. As the rough banter bounded boisterously this way and that above the heaped tin plates and steaming tin cups, Rosy-Lilly's big blue eyes would roam gravely from one face to another as if trying to understand what it was all about. But at last her eyes would come always to the face of Red McWha, and rest there in wistful admiration.

When supper was over, and pipes filled and lighted, some one would strike up a "chantey,"—one of those interminable, monotonous ballad-songs which are peculiar to the lumber camps.

These chanteys are always sung in a plaintive minor; some are sentimental or religious to the last degree, while others are amazingly vulgar. But from the hour of Rosy-Lilly's arrival in camp, all the vulgar chanteys were dropped, without a word said by anyone, from the woodmen's repertoire.

During the songs, the smoking, and the lazy fun, Rosy-Lilly would slip from one big woodsman to another, an inconspicuous little figure in the smoke-gloomed light of the oil lamps. Man after man would snatch her up to his knee, lay by his pipe, twist her silky yellow curls about his great blunt fingers, and whisper wood-folk tales or baby nonsense into her pink little ear. She would listen solemnly for a minute or two, then wriggle down and move on to another of her admirers. But before long she would be standing by the bench on which sat Red McWha with one big knee usually hooked high above the other, and his broad back reclined against the edge of a bunk. For a few moments the child would stand there smiling with a perennial confidence, waiting to be noticed. Then she would come closer and look up coaxingly into his face. If McWha were not engrossed in song, it would soon become impossible for him to ignore her. He would suddenly look down at her with his fierce eyes, knit his shaggy red brows, and demand harshly, "Well, Yaller-Top, an' what d'ye want?"

If Rosy-Lilly felt rebuffed for the moment by McWha's rudeness she seemed always to forget it the next time she saw him. But on one occasion the discomfiture was McWha's. She had elicited the customary rough demand, "Well, Yaller-Top, what d'you want?" But this time she held her ground, though with quivering lips.

"Yaller-Top ain't my name 'tall," she explained with baby politeness. "It's Rosy-Lilly; 'n' I jes' thought you might want me to sit on yer knee a little teeny minit."

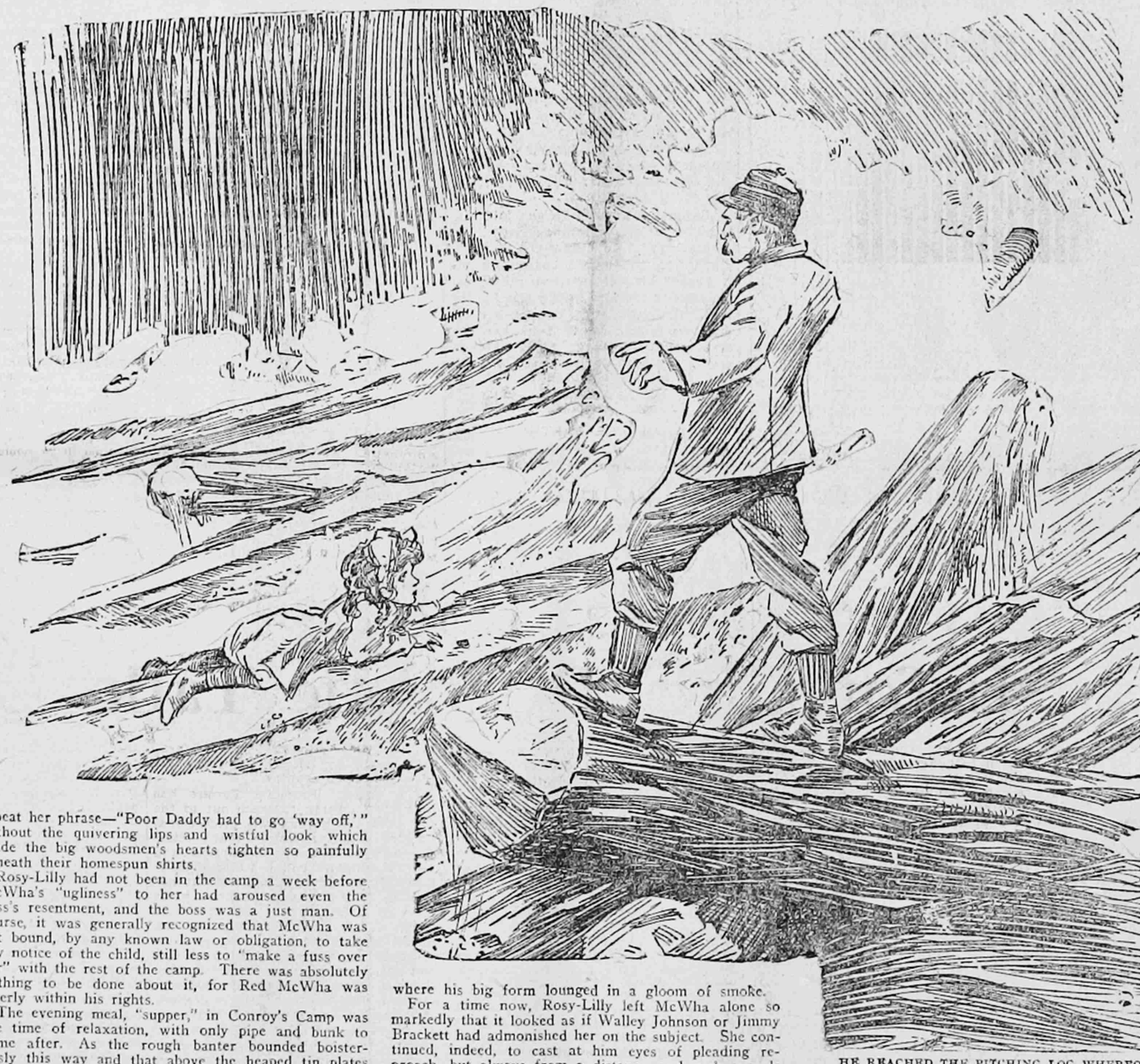
Much taken back, McWha glanced about the room with a loutish grin. Then he flushed angrily, as he felt the demand of the sudden silence. Looking down again, with a scowl, at the expectant little face of Rosy-Lilly, he growled:

"Well, not as I knows of!" and rose to his feet, thrusting her brusquely aside. To cloak his embarrassment he slouched across the room to the water-bucket and gulped a copious draught from the long-handled tin dipper. Then with a furious glance at the child—who was forgetting her wounded pride with the help of Jimmy Brackett and molasses cookey—he climbed into his bunk and settled himself for sleep.

"Ain't he ugly," murmured "Bird" Pidgeon to Walley Johnson, spitting indignantly on the stove-leg. "He'd 'a' cuffed the kid ef he dast, he glared at her that ugly!"

"Like to see 'im try it!" responded Johnson through his teeth.

After this for some days the pathetic little comedy halted. McWha would climb into the safe retreat of his bunk right after supper, and smoke there beyond danger of surprise or escalade. And Rosy-Lilly, for the moment, appeared to have dismissed him from her thoughts. Only the single piercing eye of Walley Johnson noted that she allowed herself, now and then, a swift but wistful glance toward McWha's bunk,



HE REACHED THE PITCHING LOG WHEREON ROSY LILLY STILL CLUNG

where his big form lounged in a gloom of smoke.

For a time now, Rosy-Lilly left McWha alone so markedly that it looked as if Walley Johnson or Jimmy Brackett had admonished her on the subject. She continued, indeed, to cast at him eyes of pleading reproach, but always from a distance, and such appeals rolled off McWha's crude perception like water off a muskrat's fur. He had nothing "agin' her," as he would have put it, only she would keep out of his way.

Nearly a week went by before Rosy-Lilly saw another chance to assail McWha's forbidding defences. This time she made what her innocent heart concurred to be a tremendous bid for the bad-tempered woodsman's favor. Incidentally, too, she revealed a secret which the boss and Walley Johnson had been guarding with guilty solicitude ever since her coming to the camp. It chanced that the boss and Johnson together were kept away from camp one night, till near morning, laying out a new "landing" over on Forks Brook. When it came time for Rosy-Lilly to be put to bed, the honor fell, as a matter of course, to Jimmy Brackett. Rosy-Lilly went with him willingly enough, but not till after a moment of hesitation, in which her eyes wandered involuntarily to the broad red face of McWha behind its cloud of smoke.

As a nurse-maid Jimmy Brackett flattered himself that he was a success, till the moment came when Rosy-Lilly was to be tucked into her bunk. Then she stood and eyed him with solemn question.

"What's wrong, me Honey-bug?" asked Brackett anxiously.

"You hain't heard me my prayers!" replied Rosy-Lilly, with a touch of severity in her voice.

"Eh? What's that?" stammered Brackett, startled quite out of his wonted composure.

"Don't you know little girls has to say their prayers afore they goes to bed?" she demanded.

"No!" admitted Brackett truthfully, wondering how he was going to get out of the unexpected situation.

"Walley Johnson hears me mine!" continued the child, her eyes very wide open as she weighed Brackett's qualifications in her merciless little balance.

Here Brackett was misguided enough to grin, bethinking him that now he "had the laugh" on the boss and Walley. That grin settled it.

"I dess you don't know how to hear me say 'em, Jimmy!" she announced inexorably. And picking up the skirt of her blue homespun "nightie," so that she showed her little red woolen socks and white deer-hide moccasins, she tripped forth into the big-noisy room.

At the bright picture she made, her flax-gold hair tied in a knob on top of her head, that it might not get tangled, the room fell silent instantly and every eye was turned upon her. Unabashed by the scrutiny, she made her way sedately down the room and across to McWha's bench. Unable to ignore her, and angry at the consciousness that he was embarrassed, McWha eyed her with a grim stare. But Rosy-Lilly put out her hands to him confidingly.

"I'm goin' to let you hear me my prayers," she said, her clear, baby voice carrying every syllable to the furthest corner of the room.

An ugly light flamed into McWha's eyes, and he sprang to his feet, brushing the child rudely aside.

"That's some o' Jimmy Brackett's work!" he shouted. "It's him put 'er up to it!" The whole room burst into a roar of laughter at the sight of his wrath. Snatching his cap from its peg he strode furiously out to the stable, slamming the door behind him.

One day, however, Fate concluded to range herself on Rosy-Lilly's side. A dead branch, hurled through the air by the impact of a falling tree, struck Red McWha on the head, and he was carried home to the cabin unconscious, bleeding from a long gash in his scalp. The boss, something of a surgeon in his rough-and-ready way, as bosses need to be, washed the wound and sewed it up. Then he handed over his own bunk to the wounded man, declaring optimistically that McWha would come round all right.

It was hours later when McWha began to recover consciousness; and just then, as it happened, there was no one near him but Rosy-Lilly. Smitten with pity, the child was standing beside the bunk, murmuring "Poor! Poor! I so sorry!" and slowly shaking her head and lightly patting the big, limp hand where it lay outside the blanket. McWha half opened his eyes, and their faint glance fell on the top of Rosy-Lilly's head as it bent over his hand. With a wry smile he shut them again. But to his surprise he felt rather gratified. At last he opened his eyes wide, felt his bandaged head, and called for a drink of water. To his surprise he was answered by Rosy-Lilly, so promptly that it seemed as if she had been listening for his voice. She came carrying the tin of water in both little hands; and lifting it very carefully she tried to hold it to his lips. While they were fumbling over it Jimmy Brackett hurried in, followed by the boss, and Rosy-Lilly's nursing was superseded. The boss had to hold him up so that he could drink, and when he had feverishly gulped about a quart he lay back on his pillow with a huge sigh, declaring weakly that he was all right.

"Ye got off mighty easy, Red," said the boss cheerfully, "considerin' the heft o' the knot 'at hit ye. But you McWhas was always hard to kill."

McWha's hand was drooping loosely over the edge of the bunk. He felt the child's tiny fingers brushing it again, softly and tenderly. And the sensation was so novel that he quite forgot to reply to the boss's pleasantry.

During the two days McWha was kept a prisoner he had nothing to do but smoke and whittle. He whittled diligently, but let no one see what he was making. Then, borrowing a small tin cup from the cook, he fussed over the stove with some dark, smelly decoction of tobacco juice and ink. Rosy-Lilly was consumed with curiosity, especially when she saw him apparently digging beads off an Indian tobacco-pouch which he always carried. But Jimmy Brackett did not let her go near enough to get enlightened as to this mysterious occupation.

On the following day McWha went to work again, but not till after breakfast, when the others had long departed. Rosy-Lilly, with one hand twisted in her little apron, was standing in the doorway as he passed out. She glanced up at him with a coaxing smile. McWha would not look at her, and his face was as sullenly harsh as ever; but as he passed he slipped something into her hand. To her speechless delight it proved to be a little dark-brown wooden doll, daintily carved, and with two white beads, with black centers, cunningly set into its face for eyes.

Rosy-Lilly hugged the treasure to her breast. Her first proud impulse was to run to Jimmy Brackett with it. But a subtler instinct withheld her. Somehow, from the way the gift had been bestowed, she felt it was meant to be a kind of secret. She carried it away and hid it in her bunk, where she would go and look at it from time to time throughout the day. That night she brought it forth, but with several other treasures, so that it quite escaped comment. She said nothing about it to McWha, but she played with it when he could not help seeing it. And thereafter her "nigger-baby" was always in her arms.

This compliment, however, was apparently all lost on McWha, who had again grown unconscious of her existence. And Rosy-Lilly, on her part, no longer strove to win his attention. She was content either with the victory she had won, or with the secret understanding which, perforce, now existed between them. And things went on smoothly in the camp, with every one now too occupied to do more than mind his own business.

It chanced this year that the Spring thaws were early and unusually swift, and from every brookside "landing" the logs came down in black, tumbling swarms. Just below Conroy's Camp the river wallowed round a narrow bend angled with slate ledges.

And here, now, in spite of the frantic efforts of Dave Logan and his crew, the logs suddenly began to jam.

At this stage of affairs the boss, ax in hand, picked his way across the monstrous tangle of the face of the jam between the great white jets till he gained the center of the structure. Here his practised eye presently located the timbers which held the structure firm, the "key logs" as the men called them. These he marked with his ax. Then, returning to the shore he called for two volunteers to dare the task of cutting these key logs away.

Such a task is the most perilous that a lumberman, in all his daring career, can be called upon to perform. Dave Logan had some brilliant feats of jam-breaking to his credit, from the days before he was made a boss; and now, when he called for volunteers, every unmarried man in camp responded, with the exception, of course, of Walley Johnson, whose limited vision unfitted him for such a venture. The boss chose "Bird" Pigeon and Andy White, because they were not only "smart" axmen, but also adepts in the rivermen's game of "running logs."

With a jaunty air the two young men spat on their hands, gripped their axes, sprang out along the base of the jam and plied their heavy blades. It was heroic, the work of these two, chopping coolly out there under that colossal front of death. Their duty was nothing less than to bring the toppling brow of the jam down upon them, yet cheat fate at the last instant, if possible, by leaping to shore before the chaos quite overwhelmed them.

Suddenly, while the two key logs were not yet half cut through, the trained eye of the boss detected a settling near the top of the jam. His yell of warning tore through the clamor of the waters. At the instant came a vast grumbling—not loud, apparently, yet dulling all other sounds. The two choppers sprang wildly for shore, as the whole face of the jam seemed to crumble in a breath.

At this moment a scream of terror was heard, and every heart stopped. Some thirty yards or so upstream, and a dozen, perhaps, from shore, stood Rosy-Lilly on a log. While none were observing her she had gleefully clambered out over the solid mass, looking for spruce gums. But now, when the logs moved, she was so terror-stricken that she could not even try to get ashore. She just fell down upon her log and clung to it screaming.

A groan of horror went up. The awful grinding of the break-up was already under way. Walley Johnson leaped wildly out upon the nearest logs, fell head foremost, and was dragged back, fighting furiously.

Just as Johnson went down, there arose a great bellowing cry of rage and anguish; then Red McWha's big form shot past, leaping far out upon the logs. Over the sickening upheaval he bounded this way and that, with miraculous sure-footedness. He reached the pitching log whereon Rosy-Lilly still clung. He clutched her by the frock. He tucked her under one arm like a rag-baby. Then he turned, balancing himself for an instant, and came leaping back toward shore.

A great shout of wonder and joy went up,—to be hushed in a second as a log reared high in McWha's path and hurled him backwards. Right down into the whirl of the dreadful grist he sank. But with a strength that seemed more than human he recovered himself, climbed forth dripping, and came on again with those great unerring leaps. This time there was no shout. The men waited with dry throats. Within two feet of shore a log toward which he had jumped was jerked aside just before he reached it, and turning in the air as he fell, so as to save the child, he came down across it on his side with stunning violence. As he fell, the boss, and Brackett, and two of the others, sprang out to meet him. They reached him somehow, and, covered with bruises which they did not feel, succeeded in dragging him, with his precious burden, up to safety. When his feet touched solid ground he sank unconscious, but with his arm so securely gripped about the child that they had difficulty in loosing his hold.

Rosy-Lilly, when they picked her up, was quivering with terror, but unharmed. When she saw, McWha stretched out upon the bank, motionless, with his eyes shut and his white lips half open, she fought savagely to be put down. She ran and flung herself down beside her rescuer, caught his big white face between her tiny hands, and fell to kissing him. Presently McWha opened his eyes, and with a mighty effort rose upon one elbow. A look of embarrassment passed over his face, as he glanced at the men standing about him. Then he looked down at Rosy-Lilly, grinned with a shamefaced tenderness, and pulled her gently toward him.

"I'm right—glad—ye're—safe—Rosy-Lilly," he said faintly, drawing her face down to his. "Boys, get the doc' to patch me up—I've got to live for Rosy-Lilly's sake!"

NEXT WEEK: The Engineer of 519 By Francis Lynde